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SUBJECT: ECOWAS: 34TH SESSION OF THE HEADS OF STATE AND
GOVERNMENT

11. (SBU) SUMMARY: On June 23, 2008, ECOWAS held its Thirty-Fourth Ordinary Session of Authority of Heads of State and Government in Abuja, Nigeria. Nine heads of state and six minister-level delegates attended the session, which was opened with speeches by Nigerian President Umaru Musa Yar'Adua, Burkinabe President Blaise Compaore, and Liberian President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf. During the closed-door meeting, the delegates heard reports by Commission President Dr. Mohamed Ibn Chambas, the ECOWAS Council of Ministers, and member states' Ministers of Agriculture, Trade, and Finance. The Session's Final Communique contained no major new decisions or declarations. However, in both the closing ceremonies and in a second, separate communique, ECOWAS expressed concerns over food security issues and the poor state of the region's infrastructure. The Ambassador attended the opening event as well as the closing ceremonies, along with other invited diplomats and UN Envoys Ibrahim Gambari and Said Djinnit. Ambassador also held a separate bilateral meeting with Dr. Chambas which will be reported in septel. END SUMMARY.

12. (SBU) President Yar'Adua opened the 34th Ordinary Session of the Authority of ECOWAS Heads of State and Government with a speech applauding the "relative socio-political and economic stability within our region", as well as the fact that "there is at present no 'active conflict'" in West Africa. (Note: The written copy of the President's speech put "active conflict" in quotation marks, presumably to note interstatal conflict and issues in Guinea, and not Nigeria's own ongoing crisis in the Niger Delta. End note.) In addition, he highlighted the need for progress in regional economic integration efforts, such as the Protocols on the Common External Tariff (CET), Free Movement of Goods and Persons, Right of Residence, and Right of Establishment, and called for a resolution to the conflicting interpretations of these protocols that have delayed their adoption. (Note: Nigeria is by far one of the worst offenders in lack of implementation of the CET. End note.) He also asked for consideration of unspecified "requisite structural and institutional reforms," and voiced Nigerian support for recent recommendations made by the ECOWAS Session of Ministers of Agriculture, Trade, and Finance.

13. (U) The President of Burkina Faso Blaise Compaore, who is completing 18 months as Chairman of the Commission, declared the 34th Session open by delivering an address congratulating the region on the gains made in stabilizing Cote D'Ivoire and calling for the Community to aid Guinea in recovering from its ongoing political and security crisis. He also

reaffirmed ECOWAS' "total" support for the governments of Mali and Niger as they dealt with internal insurgencies, and urged member states to be committed to a national, as well as regional, fight against narcotics trafficking. He emphasized the importance of the West Africa-European Union Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) as a tool for reducing regional poverty. Finally, President Compaore requested a region-wide effort in solving West Africa's food crisis, made more severe by ongoing desertification and drought.

¶4. (U) Liberian President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf affirmed ECOWAS' important role as a building block toward an "unwavering" commitment of creating a "Union Government for Africa." She noted that both Sierra Leone and her own country have gone from being "breeders of armed conflict" to being "exporters of peace," thanked the Community for its support for Liberia's ongoing stabilization, and highlighted Nigeria's, Ghana's, and Benin's roles under the leading roles of the U.S. and UN. She echoed Compaore's emphasis on the potentially destabilizing effects of hunger, and asked that the region's agriculture and trade ministers be tasked with establishing a database on food production and supply, a mechanism for trading food surpluses, and a means to share information on agriculture best practices.

¶5. (U) On June 24, Commission President Chambas called together representatives of foreign missions to distribute the Session's Final Communique. In reviewing the region's economic performance, the Communique lamented the fact that member states' otherwise strong 5% growth rate was insufficient to meet Millennium Development Goals,

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particularly in light of high fuel and food prices. It also stressed the important role of infrastructure in ensuring heightened economic performance, and noted that the Presidents of Cote D'Ivoire and Guinea-Bissau, Laurent Gbagbo and Joao Bernardo Vieira, had been tasked with coordinating regional infrastructure building efforts. (Note: A separate communique was distributed at the meeting highlighting this fact. End note.) The implementation of the above mentioned Protocols was urged, as was the establishment of the CET and food supply security mechanisms. In the security sector, the Session condemned the insurgencies in Mali and Niger, and called upon Niger Delta militants to desist from violence. Finally, it noted that the regional conference on drug trafficking would be held in October 2008, presumably in Guinea-Bissau.

¶6. (SBU) COMMENT: While the 34th Session highlighted important progress, especially the EPA and the stabilization of Sierra Leone and Liberia, the regional leaders made no important new decisions or declarations at the event. The leaders virtually ignored a number of major issues, such as Nigeria's crisis in the Niger Delta and fighting in northern Mali and Niger. The crisis in Zimbabwe was only mentioned briefly, in response to an inquiry from a foreign mission member. Dr. Chambas mentioned that ECOWAS had partially deployed an election observation team which would have been led by former Nigerian President Yakubu Gowon (though given the turn of events in Zimbabwe, Gowon never deployed). An observer might fairly conclude that, while the opening speeches were interesting, and West Africa faces no shortage of serious challenges and important opportunities, at present ECOWAS is not the forum of choice for its leaders to make serious headway or make pronouncements on the region's or continent's most important political challenges, such as Zimbabwe, or even Nigeria's own downward-spiralling Niger Delta conflict. END COMMENT.
SANDERS